

Section 4

Local Grounds and Personal Mythologies

The Norwegian Roots of Deep Ecology

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Has Norway anything to tell the world—something that is more or less specific for Norway and that should be appreciated by the world—before our little nation disappears, becomes just a tiny province among societies of the future superclass? I don't know anything other than the classic Norwegian *friluftsliv*: free-air-life. Norwegians walk, run, creep into nature to get rid of whatever represses them and contaminates the air, not only the atmosphere. They don't talk about going *out*, but *in* and *into* nature. There they find themselves, who they are, what they stand for. And then they come back more whole, more sure of themselves, more ready to face the problems that will inevitably confront them in cities, towns, even in their old local communities.

A sort of escapism? No. A sort of finding oneself, standing up, not like Peer Gynt “going round” and “avoiding.” And also, of course, drinking of the beauty, majesty, and generosity of nature.

The above is an idealization, but judging from what people from other countries say, it is still a living tradition. People seeking companions through small personal advertisements in newspapers write remarkably often, something like this: “I love to walk in the woods and among the mountains.” This ensures that very, very many readers think: “Well, at least one good character trait.”

I do not at all maintain that we have been wise in our environmental policy. We have been thoughtless and greedy for money, and have destroyed a lot. But we have our contradictory traits like most others, I assume.

I cannot resist the temptation to mention one very special *friluftsmann*, free-air-person.

In 1991, King Olav the Fifth of Norway died. His popularity was overwhelming. But here I shall only dwell on a subject I haven't seen others focus on, the pictures accompanying his New Year's television speeches to the people of Norway. During the speech we see one mountain landscape after the other, some with mountain flowers, others with nothing but snow, ice, and rock. Rarely do we see any people: there are no cities, and the houses, or better, homes, of humans, are inconspicuous. King Olav showed something that, at the time, was called an underdeveloped country. Now the term "developed country" has been discredited because it always refers to the rich industrial countries. Their obvious and increasing consumption should not be characterized by a plus-word like "development." The worst that can happen is for the so-called developing countries to "develop" the consumerism of the rich.

Olav the Fifth was a remarkable king who, in a unique way, illustrated the first words of our national anthem: "Yes, we do love this country . . ." It is not conceived as *our* country, in the sense of a country belonging to humans, it belongs to itself. About 50 per cent of its area is along, about, or above the timberline. But from the pictures shown during the New Year's speech, one might think that practically all of it consists of mountains and only at rare places are there the modest homes of humans.

What to me is most remarkable is the absence of comments about the pictures. I have never heard anybody utter any comment. It is as if everybody thinks "Of course, the King shows the land as it is in its grand beauty; the King expresses the population's love of the majestic land in his humility and love. No talk about its constitution, its democracy, the country's material progress."

Sometimes we are reminded of a streak of antidevelopment visions. Ibsen contrasts love and development. The tragic figure of John Gabriel Borkman, the central figure of the play with his name as the title, illustrates the self-destructive, self-centred illusion of a grandiose exploitation of nature, making nature into merely a resource. Borkman says he hears music in the mines. It is heard when the miners work to get at the mineral wealth. "... the metal sings, in its own way, out of joy," anticipating to "serve mankind!" And to serve *him* in his way to "power and glory." He loves the metal: "I love you, I love you . . .!" Nevertheless, a "metal hand" grasps him and he dies. After five years in

prison for malpractice, his dream of being a great developer kills him and his relation to his nearest.

There is another play of Ibsen, the only classical play focusing on toxic pollution and how vested interests may obstruct the efforts to warn the population about threats to their health: *The Enemy of the People*. “The whole of our flourishing municipal life derives its sustenance from a lie!” (that there is no threat from heavily polluted water). The representative of “the people” responds: “The man who can throw out such offensive insinuations about his town must be an enemy of our community.” Ibsen warns that when there is a conflict between economic interests and health, people will generally support what gives them employment and income.

I have been asked to speak about the Norwegian roots of deep ecology. What I have so far said refers to separate points of interest, but I must now try to outline what is called the deep ecology movement as a movement within environmentalism in a broad sense. The supporters of the deep ecology movement try to contribute to the protection of the abundance and diversity of life on Earth. This they have in common with all active environmentalists. What is special for them may be said this way: Their efforts are supported by their life philosophy or religious views. They tend to explain their eagerness to protect referring to their most basic views and attitudes, their value priorities, their understanding of what makes life meaningful.

Seen from a fairly narrow logical point of view which I like, the supporters of the deep ecology movement might be said to try to derive their relevant practical decisions in concrete situations from their *ultimate* premises in life. This gives them a particular strength, but may also result in undue reliance on particular philosophical or religious doctrines. But combined with a non-violent ethics of love and respect as part of their fundamental views, they are inoculated against fanaticism. What they have in common is difficult to formulate in a few sentences. My own proposal is as follows:

1. The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman Life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.
2. Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.

3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy *vital* needs.
4. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease.
5. Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
6. Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.
7. The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating *life quality* (dwelling in situations of inherent value) rather than adhering to an increasingly high standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great.
8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to try to implement necessary changes.

It is not difficult for people who have the responsibility for Norwegian environmental policy to subscribe to these principles. Actually, practically all those whom I have asked in a long letter, subscribe without any substantial reservations. So they talk about priorities, the question of producing “clean” hydroelectric power, the need for roads to reach every beautiful spot, and so on. But the basic attitude is there, and it is the Norwegian root of deep ecology.

Editor’s note: a full account of this research may be found in *SWAN* Volume 10, section 2, no. 6.